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**Olympic ceremony and diplomacy:**  
**South Korean, North Korean and British media coverage of**  
**the 2018 Olympic Winter Games' Opening and Closing ceremonies**

Jung Woo Lee (University of Edinburgh)

**ABSTRACT**

In this article, I examined South Korean, North Korean and British newspaper coverage of the Opening and Closing ceremonies of the 2018 Winter Olympics in order to identify the diplomatic gestures and conduct presented during these ceremonial events. This study looks at three diplomatically important components of the opening and closing ceremonies: artistic performance, a parade of nations, and the presence of world leaders. The media coverage of these components reveals that 1) the dissemination of a message of peace and unity, 2) the representation of unified Korean identity and Korean cultural heritage, and 3) the communication and negotiation between the high-level state officials are the three most visible acts of diplomacy at these celebrational occasions of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. In effect, the combination of cultural diplomacy, sport diplomacy, and inter-state diplomacy are actively at work during these ritualistic events. Therefore, the Olympic ceremonies present a global podium where dynamic and dramatic games of diplomacy take place.

**Keywords:** Sport Diplomacy, Winter Olympics, PyeongChang 2018, Media, Global Diplomacy Framework

**Introduction**

Global sport mega-events and world politics often intersect. The 2018 Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang arguably presents a prime example of this intersection (Rowe, 2019). Dubbed as the 'Peace Olympics', the reconciliation between North and South Korea became a major theme of this international competition (Baker & Kim, 2018). Indeed, the president of the IOC, Thomas Bach, announced in his opening address that "now in PyeongChang, the athletes from the ROK and the DPRK<sup>1</sup>, by marching together, send a powerful message of peace to the world". This development was certainly a political breakthrough given the worsening military tensions surrounding the Korean peninsula until a few months before the commencement of the Winter Olympics (Rowe & Lee, 2018). When the North Korean leader, Kim Jung-un, suddenly declared his intention to support the sport mega-event to be held in the South and decided to send a delegation to PyeongChang, the diplomatic channel between the two Koreas was re-established after almost two years of hiatus.

The inter-Korean dialogue about the Olympics in January led to the summit meeting between North and South Korea in April and this was followed by the historic US-DPRK summit in June (Lee, 2018). Consequently, the 2018 Winter Olympics was probably a turning point in Northeast Asian geopolitics.

The Korean peninsula was divided in 1948 mainly due to the ideological conflict but the people on the two sides share similar cultural and historical heritage. Thus, the reunification has been one of the major political goals of the two Korean governments since then. However, the intense power politics between North and South Korea renders the reunion only a distant dream. Nevertheless, the two Koreas often use sport, especially the Olympics, as a vehicle for displaying their desire to reunify the nation. Their first attempt was at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics where the two sides held a series of meetings to discuss the organisation of the united Korean team for this event. Yet, this inter-Korean dialogue was unproductive because of the deepening Cold War structure in the Korean peninsula (Bridges, 2007). The two sides met again prior to the 1988 Seoul Olympics but these talks only reaffirmed the severe hostility between them (Radchenko, 2012). Communist North Korea finally boycotted this Olympics. Meaningful progress was made at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Here, the two Koreas marched together at the opening ceremony as one for the first time in its history since the partition in 1948, the two sides competed as separate teams though. This reflected the mood of reconciliation emerging in the Korean peninsula, and this partial but highly visible collaboration at the Olympics continued until the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino (Lee, 2017). When the inter-Korean relations froze again in the late 2000s, no sporting collaboration could be seen at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. This pattern shows that the political circumstance largely determines the interaction between North and South Korea at the Olympic Games.

What makes the 2018 Winter Olympics distinctive in the history of the inter-Korean relations, and in the field of sport diplomacy more generally, is that it was one of the rare occasions where sport broke a political impasse and facilitated a subsequent diplomatic development (Lee, 2018; Rowe, 2019). Until December 2017, the military tensions in the Korean peninsula had been escalating and a few European nations even considered forgoing their plan to take part in this competition (Lough & Jin, 2017). As the new year arrived, North Korea rather unexpectedly sent its signal to reopen its diplomatic channel with South Korea, using the Winter Olympics as a political opportunity. This contextual backdrop provides the rationale for undertaking this study. The aim of this work is to identify the modes of diplomacy at the winter sport festival by examining and comparing South Korean, North Korean and British media coverage of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of PyeongChang 2018.

Sport diplomacy is a concept that has attracted significant academic attention in recent years (Black & Peacock, 2013; Merkel, 2017; Murray, 2018; Murray & Pigman, 2014; Rofe, 2016; Rofe, 2018) and a number of scholars have investigated the diplomatic implications of sport mega-events (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Koch, 2018; Pigman, 2014; Pope, 2014; Rowe, 2019). While their work provides useful insights into strategies and mechanisms for sport diplomacy, relatively few studies exclusively have scrutinised international politics being played out at the opening and closing ceremonies of a global sporting event. Also, most academic literature examining these ceremonial occasions is primarily concerned with globalism and/or nationalism being expressed through these rituals (Bryant, 2015; Chen, Colapinto, & Luo, 2012; Li, 2014; Oettler, 2015; Thomas & Antony, 2015). By contrast, the current study looks at diplomatic demeanours and gestures being displayed via three distinctive components of the celebrational events. These include an artistic performance, a parade of nations, and invited world leaders.

With the three components as key analytical foci, I investigate South Korean, North Korean and British media portrayals of the PyeongChang 2018 Opening and Closing Ceremonies. Whilst the news reports on the events are not the official record of world affairs at the Winter Olympics, the frame and tone of the media accounts can reveal how the three countries perceive the world politics associated with the competition (Rowe, 2019). Inter-Korean media comparison enables me to observe the two Koreas' perception of sporting unity between North and South Korea at the Winter Olympics. The observation on British media coverage allows the author to find a Western view of this inter-Korean politics. While the Korean issue is at the centre of this analysis, this study also takes account of other foreign relations and diplomacy which were presented during the opening and closing ceremonies.

### **Sport Diplomacy, Sport Mega-Events, and the Ceremonies as a Media Event**

International sport has frequently been entangled with global politics, and a nation state occasionally exploits sports to realise its foreign policy aim (Allison & Monnington, 2005; Dichter, 2014). In the contemporary international relationships where both state and non-state actors participate, sports and their governing bodies also play important roles in global diplomacy (Cooper, Heine, & Thakur, 2013; Jackson, 2013; Murray, 2018). In this respect, Murray and Pigman (2014) identify two distinctive ways in which sport and diplomacy intersect: sport in diplomacy and diplomacy in sport. The former refers to the instrumental use of sport as a form of a foreign policy tool, and the latter indicates administration and decision-making procedures within the governing bodies of international sport. While useful, this

conceptual pair by no means offers a clear-cut division between the two because there is also a grey area within this sport-diplomacy couplet. For instance, while hosting a sport mega-event may be part of a nation's diplomatic strategy for enhancing its international standing, the bidding process entails a series of communication and negotiation with global institutes and stakeholders (Beacom, 2012; Black & Peacock, 2013; E Castro, 2013).

Highlighting this evasive duality of sport diplomacy, Rofo (2016) suggests a global diplomacy framework as a tool for investigating the intersection between sport and diplomacy regardless of its settings (i.e. sport in diplomacy and diplomacy in sport). This framework consists of three major functions of modern diplomacy, namely communication, representation and negotiation (Cooper, Heine, & Thakur, 2013; Jönsson & Hall, 2003). In terms of communication, premier sporting events attract huge global attention nowadays, and this high visibility lures various political actors to exploit the occasions in order to convey their causes (Pigman, 2014). Concerning representation, participants of international competitions are often regarded as a representative of their home nations (Murray & Pigman, 2014). Additionally, it is not uncommon to see that sport represents the culture and identity of a specific nation (Bryant, 2015; Pope, 2014). With regard to negotiation, stakeholders of international sport include diverse governmental and non-governmental bodies, and the organisation and delivery of a major sporting competition entails a dialogue and subsequently a consensus between them (Black & Peacock, 2013; Rofo, 2018).

Sport mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup are arguably the most dynamic fields of sport diplomacy wherein multiple types of diplomatic exchange take place (Acuto, 2013; Beacom, 2012; Cha, 2013; Ndlovu, 2010). First, staging a sport mega-event is often related to the host nation's strategy for fostering its soft power (Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Nygård & Gates, 2013). Put simply, soft power refers to an ability to accomplish a desired foreign policy goal through attraction, and the key assets of this diplomatic force include the cultural merit of the nation in question (Nye, 2004). By hosting a global sporting event, a country can advertise its cultural heritage and sporting prowess to the world (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

Second, taking part in a major international contest provides a nation with an opportunity to display its legitimacy and sovereignty. The Olympic Games in particular offers a useful window through which non-established or contested national groups can demonstrate their existence. For instance, Hong Kong and Taiwan have shown their separate Chinese identities at this international competition (Lau, Lam, Leung, Choi, & Ransdell, 2012) and Catalonia and Quebec asserted the justification for their autonomy at the Montreal and

Barcelona Olympics (Teixeira & Chatzigianni, 2015). The appearance of the refugee team at Rio 2016 also exemplifies this identity politics at the Olympics. Similarly, North and South Korea expressed their hope to reunify the nation by presenting a sporting union at the different Olympic Games (Lee, 2017).

Third, hosting a sport mega-event necessitates diplomacy between governmental and non-governmental actors (Horne & Whannel, 2016; Murray & Pigman, 2014). The leaders of a candidate country often attend the session of international sport governing bodies in order to support its bidding campaign, and this entails communication and negotiation with committee members, transnational companies, and international media (Rowe, 2012). When a nation wins the right to host an event, the security preparation for this occasion requires an information-sharing agreement between international partners (Murray & Pigman, 2014). The local organising committee sends an invitation to world leaders and they are received and escorted by the host nation once they have arrived. These clearly show the preparation for a major sporting event necessitates statecraft and diplomatic considerations.

The Olympic Games is the largest mega-event in the world, and the opening and closing ceremonies of this prime event appear especially important insofar as sport diplomacy is concerned. These Olympic celebrations primarily consist of the representation of cultural heritage and the dissemination of a political message (Chen, Colapinto, & Luo, 2012; Oettler, 2015). Also, these ceremonies work as a powerful communication platform because they are premier media events which arouse immense global interest (Billings, Angelini, & MacArthur, 2018). In fact, Olympic celebrations are global media events that only take place sporadically, are pre-planned, are organised outside the routine of media schedules, and are broadcast live internationally (Cui, 2013; Dayan & Katz, 1992). Their communicative power and a ritualistic aura are so immense that both electronic and print media devote a large amount of resources to relay these special occasions to their domestic audiences (Billings & Wenner, 2017). Understandably, each national media filters this global event via its national prism, and it is through this media filtering that various, at times contested, cultural, political and diplomatic meanings are added to the original content (Horne, 2017; Larson & Rivenburgh, 1991; Lee & Maguire, 2009; Oettler, 2015). This perception of the Olympic ceremonies as a global media event renders the aforementioned global sport diplomacy framework particularly appropriate for an investigation into the diplomatic ramifications of opening and closing ceremonies.

In this respect, the following three distinctive features of the Olympic ceremonies are particularly noteworthy. These are the artistic performance, the parade of nations, and the invited world leaders. The artistic performance essentially includes the promotion of the

historical legacy and the demonstration of the cultural identity of a host nation. In fact, the opening and closing celebrations are the only official programmes of the Olympics where a cultural exhibition plays a central role (Bryant, 2015; Oettler, 2015). This cultural spectacle can, therefore, be part of the host country's soft power campaign to promote a positive image of the nation. The parade of nations functions as a diplomatic procedure through which each participant country displays its independent status to the world. Whilst the IOC is not an international governmental organisation, gaining recognition from this sport governing body implies the legitimacy of its government (Postlethwaite & Grix, 2016). For a host country, marching into the stadium on the final leg of the procession is the moment it receives global media attention. The presence of world leaders adds diplomatic significance to the Olympic ceremonies. A number of international VIPs attending a ceremony is not unrelated to the influence of the host country in the world order. The invited special guests also attend a welcome reception before the ceremonies, and this formal gathering often leads to bilateral talk between the host and the guest. Such a meeting can also give rise to a post-Olympic diplomatic breakthrough.

With reference to the global diplomacy framework, the notion of the global media event, and the three major components of an Olympic celebration, I attempt to identify diplomatic actions and signals being presented through the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2018 Winter Olympics.

## **Methods**

This study is based on North and South Korean and British media portrayals of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of PyeongChang 2018. Larson and Rivenburgh (1991) compared Australian, US and British telecasts of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. They, however, omitted a review of the host nation's media. Informed by their international media comparison, I carried out an East-West comparative newspaper analysis. The media coverage may not be an impartial account of international relations being played out on the Olympic stage because journalists often frame news items according to the editor's political perspective and company's interests (Davenport, 2009; Eberl, Wagner, & Boomgaarden, 2018). Despite, or because of, this bias, the media reportage is a useful record of the world politics unfolding in PyeongChang as such a relatively subjective position shows how diplomatic relations at the Olympics are perceived in different geographical locations at a particular historical juncture. Therefore, this comparative media analysis allows me to observe more than one interpretation of diplomatic behaviour being expressed during the Olympic ceremonies.

In terms of media samples, two major newspapers for each country were chosen. These include *Chosun Ilbo* and *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (South Korea), *Rodong Sinmun* and *Uriminzokkiri* (North Korea), and the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Independent* (United Kingdom). These are all major quality papers in each country<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the case of the state controlled North Korea where all media expressed an identical political voice, the two newspapers from South Korea and the United Kingdom represent conservative and liberal media respectively. However, the political alignment of each paper did not appear to influence their representation of the diplomatic issues associated with the 2018 Winter Olympics. While this set of newspaper samples by no means represents the entire media perception of the event in the three countries, it does at least offer a brief but concise glimpse into diplomatic gestures expressed through the Olympic rituals.

I focused on the media articles about the Opening and Closing ceremonies. Because the relations between the two Koreas emerged as a major diplomatic issue at the Winter Olympics (Rowe, 2019), it was legitimate to examine the North and South Korean newspapers. Furthermore, the British press reports about the ceremonies provided a relatively neutral view of inter-Korean politics<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, because hosting the Olympic Winter Games was part of South Korea's cultural diplomacy programme (Lee, 2016), an investigation into British media representation of the two Olympic rituals revealed a Western perception of Korean cultural heritage.

In terms of the number of news articles under scrutiny, the South Korean media published 71 articles about the opening and closing ceremonies (40 in *Chosun Ilbo* and 31 in *Kyunghyang Shinmun*). Regarding the North Korean press, 12 articles appeared in *Rodong Sinmun* and 10 in *Uriminzokkiri*. The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Independent* printed 14 and 31 items respectively. Given that this Winter Olympic Games was held in the South Korean town of PyeongChang, it was understandable that the host country's media published more news items related to the two occasions. Therefore, a total of 138 media accounts was investigated in this study.

In terms of the analytical procedure, this work adopts thematic analysis with a hint of critical discourse analysis (Brennen, 2017; Machin & Mayr, 2012). With regard to translation, the Korean newspapers were studied in the original language, then the nuance and meanings were translated into English (Kim K.-Y. , 2013). In order to make a systematic comparison, I mixed deductive and inductive thematic analysis. The three major components of the ceremonies namely 1) artistic performance, 2) parade of nations and 3) world leaders were used as pre-determined themes which applied to all six newspapers. Within this thematic trio,



emerging sub-themes in the media coverage of the opening and closing ceremonies were identified. Then, I categorised these themes into the three elements of the global diplomacy framework; namely communication, representation and negotiation. Within this coding scheme, I aimed to discover relevant themes as systematically as possible, but this analytical procedure was by no means completely free from the researcher's bias. This may limit the implications of this study for the field of sport diplomacy and sport communication. While the main purpose of this analysis is to identify different diplomatic interests being conveyed at the 2018 Winter Olympics, I also attempt to provide a critical reading of the major themes being highlighted in the mediated Olympic ceremonies as a global media event.

## **South Korean Media**

### **Artistic Performance**

Peace is the most prominent theme in the South Korean media coverage of the opening and closing ceremonies. As a diplomatic gesture of reconciliation, North Korea sent its delegations to PyeongChang after almost two years of escalating tensions with South Korea. With this development, the political climate surrounding the Korean peninsula shifted from a mood of resentment to a mood of rapprochement. The leitmotifs of the theatrical presentation at the Olympic celebration, such as the 'Land of Peace' and the 'Peace in Motion', clearly reflected this tenor of détente. When observing these performances, *Chosun Ilbo* commented that "the flame of peace after the time of hardship. I got misty-eyed..." (10 Feb 2018, p. 2). *Kyunghyang Shinmun* shared this sentiment: "the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics transforms the fire of war into the flame of peace. This is a dramatic change" (10 Feb 2018, p. 1). Through the artistic displays at the ceremonies, the host nation, which had been at the centre of East Asian geopolitical tensions, intended to convey the voice of peace to the world. The media also relayed such a message. This is a useful exemplar of diplomatic communication at the Olympics (Rofe, 2016).

A theme of traditional Korean culture is also noticeable in the media reports on the ceremonies. The news items concerning the Korean language and symbols are particularly noteworthy in this respect. With the headline, "the stage that was decorated with our sounds and our signs", *Chosun Ilbo* celebrated that "I take pride in Korean culture when the video showing the beautiful geometric pattern of our Korean alphabet was played" (10 Feb 2018, p. 3). *Kyunghyang Shinmun* also acclaimed the performance saying that "in the second scene, the *taeguek*: the harmony of the universe, a splendid Korean traditional drum dancing was presented. When the combination of the dancers and the illumination made a perfect shape of

a *teaguek* symbol, the audiences extolled the show” (10 Feb 2018, p. 4). This representation of the host nation’s unique cultural heritage is an important aspect of the Olympic ceremonies through which its cultural merit can be introduced and promoted to the international audiences (Bryant, 2015; Cui, 2013).

Additionally, the Olympic ceremonies included the presentation of Korean popular culture. With the increasing popularity of Korean showbusiness globally (Fedorenko, 2017), it is not surprising that the Olympic host utilised a number of Korean celebrities to entertain the spectators. Regarding this, *Chosun Ilbo* (26 Feb 2018, p. 2) portrayed the Olympic finale as if it were “yet another K-pop concert”. It further noted that the “Korean Wave stars CL and Exo’s passionate concerts intensely heated the air in the Olympic stadium (26 Feb 2018, p. 2)”. *Kyunghyang Shinmun* also described this show as the “power of a Korean performance culture that embraced the world” (26 Feb 2018, p. 12). Interestingly *Chosun Ilbo* reported the meeting between Ivanka Trump<sup>4</sup> and the Korean pop stars with her saying that “my children are your huge fans” (26 Feb 2018, p. 5). This brief exchange between the high-profile American delegation and the Korean cultural icons exemplifies an act of Korean cultural diplomacy that the Olympic ceremonies facilitated.

### **Parade of Nations**

Unity and reconciliation were the two distinctive themes in the newspaper coverage of the procession of the nations. As the North and South Koreans marched together as one, the South Korean newspapers devoted much space to publish news stories about the joint march including photographs capturing this incident. *Kyunghyang Shinmun* recorded that “the joint march at the Olympic stadium in PyeongChang was an emotional, meaningful and historical event which demonstrates a peaceful desire for the unification between the North and the South” (10 Feb 2018, p. 2). Likewise, *Chosun Ilbo* relayed the climate as it happened: “when the South Korean team entered the stadium together with the North Korean team under the banner of [unified] **Korea**, cheering and a standing ovation erupted from the terrace” (10 Feb 2018, p. 2, emphasis original). This mood continued at the closing ceremony. *Kyunghyang Shinmun* noted that “when the North and South Korean athletes harmoniously entered the stadium waving the South Korean, North Korean, and Korean Peninsula flags, the sound of passionate support dominated the stadium” (26 Feb 2018, p. 4).

In consideration of the global diplomacy framework especially related to communication and representation, presenting sporting union at the opening and closing ceremonies can be an effective way to demonstrate the shared Korean identity and Korean

people's desire to reunify the nation to the world (Bridges, 2012). The South Korean newspapers certainly recognised this significance, and they transmitted this “historical” and “emotional” moment to its readers. In fact, it was not the first joint march at an Olympic ceremony. From Sydney 2000 to Turin 2006, North and South Korea displayed their unity by entering the stadium together during the opening event. This practice of the joint march halted when the inter-Korean relations soured in 2008 (Lee, 2017). After a decade of tensions and conflicts, the two sides finally resumed their sporting collaboration. In so doing, they were able to impart a signal of détente and a symbol of unified identity to the world audiences.

### **World Leaders**

A number of high-level representatives attended the opening and closing ceremonies, and the presence of these VIPs created an opportunity where the international leaders held a series of official and unofficial meetings in PyeongChang. In this respect, the South Korean media focused on inter-Korean relations, US-North Korean relations, and Japan-Korea relations. With the improving relations between the two Koreas at the Winter Olympics, the North Korean high-level delegations to the two ceremonial occasions attracted immense media interest. The most notable individual was Kim Yo-jong, the younger sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Regarding her visit, *Kyunghyang Shinmun* commented that “the fact that Kim Jong-un sent his sister and a prominent power elite Kim Yo-jung means that the North Korean leader is harnessing his best possible diplomatic means. She is de facto chairman Kim’s special envoy” (10 Feb 2018, p. 8). *Chosun Ilbo* relayed a friendly gesture between the two sides: “When she entered the VIP area in the Olympic stadium, Kim Yo-jong shook hands with the president Moon Jae-in with a bright smile” (10 Feb 2018, p. 8). These news reports reinforced the easing of tensions in the Korean peninsula that the Winter Olympics had initiated.

The US-North Korean relations at the Olympics was not so optimistic. Mike Pence visited South Korea and the US vice president displayed a suspicious attitude towards the North Korean delegation while he stayed in the host country. *Chosun Ilbo* reported Mr Pence’s visit to the memorial of the *Cheonan* navy ship. This South Korean patrol vessel was sunk by North Korea’s torpedo attack in 2010. A group of North Korean refugees also accompanied the vice president. This newspaper emphasised Mr Pence’s mistrust of communist North Korea and reproduced his view: “the thawing period would end when the Olympic cauldron extinguishes” (10 Feb 2018, p. 6). *Kyunghyang Shinmun* also wrote about Mike Pence’s homage at the war memorial and his meeting with North Korean refugees but with a critical undertone, saying that “there is an opinion that Mike Pence’s visit to the memorial of *Cheonan* was inappropriate

because he primarily came to South Korea to celebrate the Olympic Games” (10 Feb 2018, p. 8). This American representative’s behaviour clearly imparted the US government’s scepticism towards the North Korean conciliatory gestures at the Games.

The relations between South Korea and Japan is complex due to Japanese colonialism and because of their close economic ties (Kim H. , 2011). This mixture of the historical rivalry and the trade partnership renders the Korea-Japan connection uneasy and at times thorny. The period surrounding the Winter Olympics was the time when the mistrust between the two sides was intensifying due to controversy over the Korean comfort women during the colonial time. Despite this tension, the Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe travelled to South Korea, and his visit subsequently led to a summit meeting at a ski resort in PyeongChang. The South Korean media covered and highlighted this bilateral talk. *Chosun Ilbo* (10 Feb 2018, p. 5) wrote that “the mood is not so negative during the opening speech [as the two leaders highlighted the importance of the collaboration between them]... but the unbridgeable gaps concerning the issues around the history and security were obviously detectable in the confidential meeting”. Similarly, *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (10 Feb 2018, p. 8) described the overall circumstance of the summit as “bumpy”. While no meaningful agreement was made, this South Korea-Japan summit clearly evidences an opportunity for diplomatic communication and negotiation that the Winter Olympics facilitated (Jönsson & Hall, 2003; Rofo, 2016).

## **North Korean Media**

### **Artistic Performance**

The relations between North and South Korea, especially the unity of the two Korean states, was the main theme in the North Korean media coverage of the artistic performance at the opening and closing ceremonies. It should be noted that the DPRK’s newspapers paid relatively little attention to the cultural aspect of the Olympic rituals. Moreover, a report on the performance of South Korean artists was absent in their coverage of the two ceremonies. Instead, the North Korean media only highlighted the activities of DPRK’s cultural ambassadors to PyeongChang. The demonstration of taekwondo skills and the concert of North Korean musicians were the two cultural events on which the communist media focused despite being a sideshow of the Olympic ceremonies. This pattern can be seen as illustrative of the secretive communist regime’s censorship, through for example their ban on consumption of ‘harmful’ South Korean cultural commodities (Talmadge, 2016). This may also reflect North

Korean propaganda which emphasises the appreciation of North Korean cultural excellence by South Korean people.

*Rodong Sinmun* (10 Feb 2018, p. 2) wrote that “before the opening ceremony, taekwondo practitioners from North and South Korea demonstrated their skills which not only displayed the supreme quality of this authentic martial art but also showed Korean people’s wisdom and their stubborn spirit.” As taekwondo is originated from Korea, this martial art is an important component of Korean cultural identity on both sides of the border (Lee & Bairner, 2009). Therefore, a friendly taekwondo contest often takes place as part of inter-Korean cultural exchange programmes. The North Korean delegations included a taekwondo demonstration team, and this martial art functioned as a shared cultural bridge between the divided Korean people in PyeongChang. *Rodong Sinmun* clearly underlines this shared cultural legacy that taekwondo represents.

North Korean musicians also crossed the border along with their athletes, and they held a series of concerts in PyeongChang during the Olympics. Regarding these musical shows, *Rodong Sinmun* (9 Feb 2018, p. 11) reported that “the musicians excellently demonstrated our nation’s great musical culture, which has more than 5,000 years of history, with a voice of great volume and art of elegant playing”. On the day of the closing ceremony, *Uriminzokkiri* (25 Feb 2018) recalled these concerts as a “passionate spectacle that united North and South Korean people together”. Meanwhile, the two North Korean news media published no report on the South Korean cultural performance at the opening and closing ceremonies even though this spectacle was the main feature of the celebrational occasions. This absence may reflect the DPRK’s prohibition of the circulation of capitalist popular culture within their country. Rather, North Korean media underscores the role of North Korean artists as cultural intermediaries at the Winter Olympics. Consequently, the communist media simply focused on the unity and superiority of the Korean nation symbolised through the North Korean delegation on South Korean soil. This is indicative of the highly controlled journalistic output in the secretive state.

### **Parade of Nations**

The North Korean media stressed the Korean team’s joint march at the opening ceremony as a way to demonstrate a unified Korean identity. Again, unity was the theme in this report. *Rodong Sinmun*’s headline read “the opening of the 23rd Winter Olympic Games: the North and South Korean athletes marched together under the unification flag” (10 Feb 2018, p. 2). This newspaper further noted that “a round of applause and cheering erupted from the terrace when the athletes from the North and the South entered the stadium together bearing

the unification flag while the *Arirang* was being played” (10 Feb 2018, p. 2), and it went that “the attendees of the opening ceremony passionately supported the North and South Korean athletes who were marching together, waving the unification flag imprinted an image of the Korean peninsula” (10 Feb 2018, p. 2). This news item also included a photograph of the unified team parading the Olympic venue and of the North Korean official Kim Yo-jung and the South Korean president Moon Jae-in waving at the Korean team. This combination of the words and the images emphasised the welcoming environment in the stadium when the athletes from the two Koreas were parading as one. In this newspaper coverage, the demonstration of a unified Korean identity is the key message.

This media account especially accentuated national symbols being used at the ceremony. This article identified the name of the music being played when the Korean Olympic team entered the stadium: *Arirang*. This is a traditional Korean folksong which is popularly sung on both sides of the border. At the same time, it is an unofficial anthem of a unified Korea. Whenever North and South Korean athletes participate in an international competition as a single entity, this tune is normally played. Moreover, not only did this report mention the unification flag several times repeatedly, but it also highlighted the image of the Korean peninsula on this flag. These two symbols of the Korean nation, the traditional folk music and the geographical map of the entire peninsula, are seen as textual devices for justifying ethnic tie between North and South Korean people. In this manner, this joint march during the parade of nations worked as a significant ritual in which a unified Korean identity is represented, and *Rodong Sinmun* duly transmitted the political meaning of the sporting union.

## **World Leaders**

For the North Korean media, the conduct of the DPRK’s high-level officials seems more important than any other events taken place at the ceremonies. *Rodong Sinmun* published three distinctive news items in the front and second pages whose headlines included “the DPRK’s high-level representatives departed from Pyongyang to attend the opening ceremony of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Winter Olympic Games (10 Feb 2018, p. 1)”, “the DPRK’s high-level representatives arrived in South Korea” (10 Feb 2018, p. 1), and “Comrade Kim Yong-nam met the President Moon Jae-in” (10 Feb 2018, p. 2) respectively. This newspaper largely perceived this development from the perspective of the North Korean representatives. It also portrayed how much the South Korean officials welcomed the North Korean guests. While the overall undertone of these media account shows amicable relations between the two Koreas, this coverage tends to highlight the VIP status of the North Korean delegation in the South.

Concerning its relationship with the US, the North Korean media maintained a belligerent attitude. In its editorial, *Rodong Sinmun* (10 Feb 2018, p. 6) vehemently criticised Mike Pence's behaviour in South Korea, especially his visit to the memorial of *Cheonan* naval ship. The same article also disparaged the US vice president's avoidance of meeting the North Korean delegates at the pre-opening ceremony reception where the invited guests held informal gatherings. Headlined "an ugly move to even manipulate the holy Olympics to conspire against North Korea", the North Korean newspaper portrayed Mr Pence as a "super idiot who completely lost an ability to see the reality as he had been totally brainwashed by an insane dotard, Mr Trump" (10 Feb 2018, p. 6). Through this highly provocative comment, the North Korean media imparted its fury over Mr Pence's demeanour in South Korea.

The North Korea-Japan relations was another theme that DPRK's media reports disseminated. When Abe Shinzo, the Prime Minister of Japan, travelled to PyeongChang, he often stayed close to Mr Pence to show his intimate connection with the US Vice President. At the same time, Mr Abe also intended to meet the North Korean delegations, especially Kim Yo-jung. However, the younger sister of Kim Jung-un refused to convene a meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister. Regarding this incident, *Rodong Sinmun* (26 Feb 2018, p. 5) scorned that "Mr Abe and his gangs got humiliated as they acted overconfidently at the Olympics Games". Additionally, *Uriminzokkiri* (10 Feb 2018), in a report headlined an "improper behaviour that denies the sovereignty of our nation's land", criticised Japan for their attempt to remove a small dot representing *Dokdo*<sup>5</sup> from the unification flag that the Korean athletes carried. These accounts demonstrate North Korea's hostility against Japan.

## **British Media**

### **Artistic performance**

The two British newspapers under scrutiny also recognised peace as a major theme of the Olympic ceremonies and relayed this message from PyeongChang to British readers. The *Daily Telegraph* wrote that "peace in motion: this was the theme of an occasion long on symbolism..." (10 Feb 2018, p. 10). Then, it further noted that:

In their wake flowed the River of Times, stirred up by a storm designed to signify *the turmoil of Korean history*. And yet, from among the buckwheat blossoms, iridescent fireflies – each *representing a dream of the people...* Truly, you cannot fault the Olympics for the money spent on elaborate metaphors (10 Feb 2018, p. 11, italics added).

This media extract mirrored the intended meaning of the artistic performance: Korean people's strong desire for peace because of the turbulent historical trajectory that the nation underwent. Often, a historical narrative of the host country is presented during the opening and closing ceremonies, and this pageantry is a useful opportunity to introduce a particular mode in which the host nation is imagined to the international audiences (Thomas & Antony, 2015). On this ceremonial occasion, South Korea projected its image as a peace-loving nation. Such a national branding can be part of the host nation's cultural diplomacy, and this representation of South Korea was reproduced in this British newspaper.

The two papers also presented the traditional and popular culture of Korea in the coverage of the Olympic ceremonies. The *Daily Telegraph* published a photograph of Korean traditional dancers on the Olympic stage with a caption that "artists perform around a giant turtle – an animal sacred to Koreans – at the closing ceremony" (The *Daily Telegraph*, 26 Feb 2018, p. 1). The *Independent* paid more attention to the popular culture of the host country. Its two-page wide photograph depicted EXO, a Korean pop group, singing in the stadium. This report also noted that "performances by singer CL and boyband EXO showcased best Korean pop music" (the *Independent*, 26 Feb 2018, p. 6). Through these media portrayals, the traditional and contemporary culture of Korea can be publicised to British readers. This, in turn, exemplifies Korean cultural diplomacy at the Winter Olympics.

### **Parade of Nations**

Understandably, the Team GB was the focal point in the British newspaper coverage of the Olympic parade. A large photograph of the British athletes marching into the stadium bearing the union flag was located at the centre of an Olympic news section in the two daily papers in question. A typical media text in this thematic category includes "I love my ambassadorial role with Team GB" (the *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Feb 2018, p. 11), and "Team GB on top of the world as Games come to triumphant end" (the *Independent*, 26 Feb 2018, p. 6). It is interesting to see one of the GB athletes considered herself as an 'ambassador', and this implies the Olympics as a venue for public diplomacy (Murray, 2018). The theme of Team GB is also indicative of the practice of banal nationalism at work in the mediated sport (Billig, 1995; Bowes & Bairner, 2019). In this way, a daily consumption of media functions as a mundane ritual to affirm the national identity of target readers.

In addition, the British newspapers paid significant attention to the unity of the two Korean teams. For instance, with the headline "history made as North and South Korea march



under one flag”, a photograph of the unified Korean team marching into the stadium appeared in the front page of the *Independent* (10 Feb 2018, p. 1). The *Daily Telegraph* also published an image of the two Korean flag bearers with the caption that “All together: North and South Korean athletes arrive under unification flag” (10 Feb 2018, p. 11). This newspaper further noted that quoting the IOC president Thomas Bach’s speech, “by marching together, the two Koreas ‘had sent a powerful message of peace to the world’” (The *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Feb 2018, p. 15). The *Independent* also expressed a similar feeling: “not surprisingly, the unity theme was given a central role in the opening ceremony...” (10 Feb 2018, p. 4).

Representation and communication are the two major functions of sport diplomacy (Jönsson & Hall, 2003; Rofe, 2016), and the media extracts above clearly show these diplomatic roles that the joint march performed. The representation of a unified Korean identity at the Olympic ceremony is an important diplomatic gesture for South Korea because it demonstrates the nation’s desire to reunify the Korean peninsula to international audiences. Regarding communication, South Korea as an Olympic host intended to impart a message of peace to the world by displaying the amiable unity. Largely positive portrayals of the sporting union of the two Koreas by the British newspapers imply an effective demonstration of Korean national identity and an efficient dissemination of a message of peace from PyeongChang at least to UK audiences.

### **World leaders**

The *Independent*’s headline for the main news story of the opening ceremony, “world’s leaders and athletes come together in an ice-cold spectacle” (10 Feb 2018, p. 4-5), aptly captured not only the weather, but also the political environment at that moment. The British media well recognised the diplomatic breakthrough that this sport mega-event accomplished. At the end of the sporting competition, the *Independent* commented that “One of the biggest achievements of this Winter Olympic was the easing tensions between North and South Korea, which was evident from the invited guests” (26 Feb 2018, p. 7). Here, these visitors referred to the American and North Korean representatives hosted by the South Korean president. In consideration of the worsening tensions and hostilities between the US and the DPRK a few months before the Winter Olympic Games, the assembly of these high-level officials in the stadium was a notable scene.

Nonetheless, the British media was able to detect both an amicability and an antipathy between these individuals. The *Daily Telegraph*’s headline correctly suggested this mixed mood: “Koreas unite... as Pence carefully keeps his distance” (10 Feb 2019, p. 15). In terms

of the North and South Korean relations, the UK newspapers highlighted a friendly gesture between the two sides. For instance, the *Independent* wrote that “Kim’s sister meets South Korean leader in show of unity” (10 Feb 2019, p. 5). The *Daily Telegraph* detailed that “in the VIP box, Moon Jae-in, South Korea’s president, waved proudly as...Kim Yo-jung, sister of North Korean leader..., applauded the teams. The two had just shared a historic handshake...” Here, the terms ‘unity’ and a ‘historic handshake’ signify the rapprochement between the two Koreas.

On the other hand, the UK media depiction of US-North Korean relations at the Olympic was largely negative. The front page of the *Daily Telegraph* (10 Feb 2018, p. 1) contained a photograph that captured the moment Mr Pence and Ms Kim sat closely but were avoid looking at each other. This visual metaphor is suggestive of the antagonism between the two countries. Likewise, the *Independent* reported that “Mr Pence, sitting between Mr Moon and the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, had no interaction with Ms Kim” (10 Feb 2018, p. 5). Such demeanour also implies the American’s mistrust of the North Korean. At the opening and closing ceremonies, the US and DPRK’s delegations maintained an icy relationship. Yet, before returning to North Korea, one of its officials hinted that his country has an intention to improve its tie with the US, and the *Independent* (26 Feb 2018) reported this last-minute diplomatic gesture. This suggests that the Olympics can provide a diplomatic channel through which international communication takes place.

## **Discussion**

In the modern diplomacy, both state and non-state actors including civilians can play various ambassadorial roles as the venue for diplomacy diversifies from a negotiation table to a concert hall (Cooper, Heine, & Thakur, 2013). The Opening and Closing ceremonies of the Olympics are comprised of rituals and protocols that have meaningful diplomatic implications. In this respect, this study focused on the three distinct components of the Olympic ceremonies namely an artistic performance, a parade of nations, and invited world leaders. A number of scholars identify communication, negotiation and representation as three core elements of the global diplomacy framework (Jönsson & Hall, 2003; Murray & Pigman, 2014; Rofe, 2016). This research reveals that these notions can be applicable to various interactions and performances taken place at the Winter Olympic celebrations. The newspapers in South Korea, North Korea, and Britain recorded these multiple types of diplomacy in action at the sport mega-event.

In this section, I briefly revisit the major themes that appeared in the media coverage of the Olympic ceremonies and discuss how these topics are connected to the functions of diplomacy. Also, critical reading of the media portrayals is presented here. The peace and unity were themes that the South Korean and British newspapers highlighted in their reports on the artistic performance during the ceremonies. A theme of South Korean culture, both traditional and contemporary forms, also appeared in the two countries' media reportage. In effect, the Olympic ceremonies work as a useful cultural diplomacy tool for the host country where the merit of its cultural heritage can be exhibited. The dissemination of a message of peace and the display of Korean culture exemplify the function of communication and representation within the framework of modern diplomacy (Cooper, Heine, & Thakur, 2013; Jönsson & Hall, 2003; Rofe, 2016).

A joint march between North and South Korea attracted global media attention, and the South Korean, North Korean, and British newspapers paid a significant interest to this sporting union. In their news features, reconciliation and reunification were the most distinctive themes. By making this symbolic unity at the Olympic ceremony, the host nation and its sibling country could demonstrate their shared identity to the world. The North and South Korean media accounts of the joint march remind its people of ethnic homogeneity and thereby reinforces the necessity for the reunification of their home nation. The British newspapers also highlighted the ethnic connection between the two Koreas and explained the Korean people's desire to the reunion of North and South Korea. The Winter Olympic ceremonies offered the host country a diplomatic platform where its unified identity is represented and its desire to reunify the nation is communicated.

A number of world leaders attended the Opening and Closing ceremonies of the 2018 Winter Olympics, and this gathering of high-level officials in PyeongChang led to a series of meetings between them. These representatives also expressed and exchanged subtle diplomatic gestures during these celebrational rituals. The South Korean, North Korean and British media all importantly reported the appearance of the international VIPs and their behaviours at the Olympics. This high media interest indicates that the attendance of these non-sporting delegations is a significant aspect of the ceremonies. The media especially focused on inter-Korean relations, Korea-Japan relations, and US-Korea relations. This interaction between the special guests suggests that the Olympics could facilitate the re-establishment of a diplomatic channel between the nation-states. This development subsequently illustrates communication and negotiation between diplomatic actors at the Olympic ceremonies.

It is true that the 2018 Winter Olympics mediated the communication and collaboration between the two Koreas. However, the media portrayals of peace and harmony need to be read with caution. In fact, the International Olympic Committee tends to depict their sporting event as if it was an evangelistic ritual to promote world peace and global fraternity, and the sport governing body requests the cessation of any conflict during the fortnight of athletic competitions with the reference to the notion of the Olympic Truce (Girginov & Parry, 2005). PyeongChang 2018, especially concerning the inter-Korean relations within, aptly fits this IOC's publicity frame. It is difficult to prove the cartel between the media and the Olympic industry, but the eulogistic depiction of the Olympic ceremonies by the press in question implies the hegemony of the IOC at work in the production of this sport media spectacle (Billings, 2008; Horne, 2017). As this study shows there were many symbols and gestures that praised the harmonious reconciliation between the two Koreas, and the media relayed such signs of peace with reverence. While I do not deny the fact that this Winter Olympic Games mitigated the diplomatic impasse between North and South Korea, the sudden eruption of peaceful rhetoric at the competition was surely exaggerated and superficial. Also, Olympic and media discourse of the reunification is strictly speaking an empty cliché because the two Korean regimes envision two different unified Korean states. Indeed, the opening and closing ceremonies clearly show the characteristics of the media event wherein the risk and uncertainty in ordinary life was temporally ceased and the discourse of harmony and awe was momentarily accentuated (Billings & Wenner, 2017; Dayan & Katz, 1992).

Additionally, nationalistic and political undertones are very evident in the media reports on the opening and closing ceremonies. The joint march of the Korean team exemplifies this trend. It should be noted that nationalism is a contested idea and often more than one discourse of nationalism and national identity are being circulated within a nation (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Korea is no exception. The joint march and the Korean Peninsula flag mainly represent so called unified Korean nationalism (Lee, 2015). More importantly, this nationalist view is one of the major political doctrines of the ruling party in South Korea. The opposition maintains a rather sceptical attitude toward this symbolic unification in the stadium. In the two South Korean newspapers, a critical review of the surge of this type of Korean nationalism hardly exists. In the North Korea media coverage, the reunification was also a major theme, but this symbolic unity was largely represented as the achievement of their despotic leader. In terms of the two British papers, the joint march was predominantly seen in the context of a spirit of goodwill that the Olympic Games created which is probably not unrelated the IOC's public relations effort mentioned above. Yet, news related to Team GB was the major focal

point of the Olympic coverage. In this respect, a British centred view was clearly visible when transmitting this global festival. This pattern indicates that this mediated sporting event regularly reminds its readers of their national identity (Billig, 1995; Bryant, 2015).

The major aim of this study is to identify the diplomatic values of the 2018 Winter Olympics, and therefore I also pay attention to news items related to international political figures in PyeongChang. Indeed, the Olympic Games as a global media event functions as a pseudo diplomatic assembly in which the invited world leaders display their friendship or at least pretend to be allies. At the Olympic ceremonies, the following four individuals received particularly significant media attention: the South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the North Korean leader's sister Kim Yo-jong, the US Vice President Mike Pence, and the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The first encounter and the subsequent amicable gesture between the two Korean encapsulate the diplomatic meaning of this Olympics. Understandably, various international media reported this moment as one of the main media stories (Rowe, 2019). Yet, this diplomatic demeanour must not be read too romantically. This gathering was certainly a historic event but the appearance of the North Korean woman could be part of the despotic regime's charm offensive (Lee, 2018). This temporal friendship by no means guarantees a long-term partnership between the two sides. Mr Pence doubted the peaceful signal from communist Korea, and Mr Abe stayed on the American side. Both North and South Korean newspapers in question portrayed their scepticism negatively while the two British media framed the two visitors' posture in a more neutral way. This demonstrates that Korean and Western media had a different view of inter-Korean diplomacy at the Winter Olympics.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I examined newspaper coverage of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2018 Winter Olympics in order to identify the diplomatic functions that these ceremonial occasions played. This Winter Olympics in PyeongChang is arguably one of the most politicised Games with the political breakthrough between North and South Korea as a major feature (Rowe & Lee, 2018). Understandably, international media relayed a message of peace and unity in their reports on PyeongChang 2018 (Rowe, 2019). So as to investigate the diplomatic signals and gestures presented through this winter sport mega-event more systematically, I undertook a thematic analysis of the South Korean, North Korean, and British newspaper articles concerning the two Olympic ceremonies.

The Opening and Closing ceremonies of the Olympics is particularly important for global diplomacy primarily because of the massive media attention that the two celebrational

rituals receive internationally. In fact, these ceremonies are the most popular media events within the Olympics (Billings, Angelini, & MacArthur, 2018). This wide media coverage provides these ceremonies with immense communicative power. Additionally, the ceremonies are essentially a cultural spectacle and a political ritual with various symbolisms and nuances at play (Horne & Whannel, 2016). The full of meaningful gestures and actions being vividly relayed by the international media makes the Olympic celebrations an important venue for both cultural and sport diplomacy.

This study focused on the three diplomatically important components of the opening and closing ceremonies: an artistic performance, a parade of nations, and the presence of world leaders. The media coverage of these components reveals that 1) the dissemination of a message of peace and unity, 2) the representation of unified Korean identity and Korean cultural heritage, and 3) the communication and negotiation between the high-level state officials are three most visible acts of diplomacy at the two celebrational occasions of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. In effect, the combination of cultural diplomacy, sport diplomacy, and inter-state diplomacy is actively at work during these ritualistic events. It is an exaggeration to state that sport can resolve a dispute between nations. However, as the North and South Korean relations at this Olympic Winter Games shows, sport can lubricate a diplomatic dialogue. In this respect, the Olympic ceremonies present a global podium on which dynamic and dramatic games of diplomacy take place.

These three components of the opening and closing ceremonies offer a useful analytical framework for examining diplomatic performances at play in a different sport mega-event. They are, indeed, the common features of almost every ceremonial ritual of international sporting competition while different political actors and issues enter this platform of sport diplomacy. With this conceptual tool, therefore, diplomatic connotations that each Olympic ceremony can be compared and contrasted. Particularly, at the time of this writing, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics is less than one year away, and the rivalry and uncertainty in the East Asian relations are rapidly escalating (White, 2019). Therefore, it would be interesting to look at how this geopolitical issue is mirrored through the ceremonies of Tokyo 2020. Additionally, the relations between North and South Korea at the forthcoming Olympics in East Asia including the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing deserves careful and critical academic attention. This is particularly so since the two Koreas even consider hosting the Olympic together in 2032 (McCurry, 2019). In this future research project, interviews with policymakers, athletes, and journalists can complement an international media comparison in order to draw a more sophisticated landscape of the diplomacy at the Olympics.

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<sup>1</sup> The ROK refers to the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the DPRK is an abbreviation for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).

<sup>2</sup> The circulation of the selected newspapers is as follows: *Chosun Ilbo* (1,800,000+), *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (350,000+), the *Daily Telegraph* (363,183), and the *Independent* (236,339). These figures are as of December 2019. The circulation of the two North Korean newspapers is unknown but they are the official press of the regime.

<sup>3</sup> Although examining US media would certainly have enriched this analysis, had I included the US media, I should also have considered Japanese media because both the USA and Japan were important political actors at the Winter Olympics. Such a large-scale global media comparison was beyond the remit of the current study which would have required much more resources than I have.

<sup>4</sup> She is the daughter of Mr Donald Trump and a special advisor to the US President.

<sup>5</sup> It is an inhabited islet between Japan and Korea, which is permanently settled by Korean people.

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